

Bush: U.S. Would React to Soviet Cutoff in Lithuania

Response Would Be Calibrated to Degree of Economic Squeeze Put on Breakaway Republic

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President Bush warned yesterday that the United States would make "appropriate responses" if the Soviet Union carried out its threat to sharply reduce natural gas supplies to Lithuania, and he convened the National Security Council to consider a series of steps aimed primarily at putting a brake on improved U.S.-Soviet economic ties.

A senior official said Bush, reacting to the Soviet announcement that it would reduce natural gas supplies to the breakaway Baltic republic, was awaiting details on the extent of the reduction and its impact on Lithuania before deciding on what the official said would be "a response calibrated" to the level of the Soviet action.

At an earlier session with Democratic senators who recently returned from a trip to Moscow, the president lamented that he did not want to get into a spiraling series of moves and countermoves with the Soviets. "Where does it end?" Bush was quoted as asking the group while suggesting he did not want the Lithuanian situation to stop broader progress in U.S.-Soviet relations.

The president reflected that concern in an interview yesterday with a group of European journalists. "I want to be sure anything we do is productive," he said. "There's been a dramatic change in the world and

I don't want to inadvertently take some action that would set it back. And yet, I don't want to be seen as one who is not interested in peaceful change and in the self-determination for Lithuania."

Bush's remarks about an appropriate response, officials said, did not necessarily mean more than a sharpening of the rhetoric. In a morning photo session, Bush said, "We are considering appropriate responses if these threats are implemented," adding that the administration is "watching the situation very, very closely" to see "if the Soviet announcements are implemented." Those announcements, he said, "are contrary to the approach that we have urged and that others have urged upon the Soviet Union."

As he has in the five weeks since Lithuania announced its independence from Moscow, Bush urged dialogue. "What we need is dialogue, discussion and a peaceful resolution of this great difficulty here," he said.

The concern in the administration about Moscow's actions has increased step by step since the sudden and generally unexpected Lithuanian declaration of independence from the Soviet Union March 11. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's threats against the breakaway republic were first considered to be part of a war of nerves, but in recent days the administration has been increasingly concerned about dramatic Soviet action that would require a U.S. response.

After the announcement of the

natural gas cutoff, it seems clear that Gorbachev is determined to do everything in his power to make certain any Lithuanian move toward independence takes place on his terms and at his pace, a senior administration official said. In this pursuit, he said, Gorbachev may seek to intimidate or humiliate Lithuania's new government through economic and political measures,

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while stopping short of using Soviet military force in a conventional crackdown.

Bush's senior aides have been working for several weeks on a list of options for responding to Soviet moves at a variety of levels. The list was updated and refined Friday, after the Soviets threatened to impose an economic boycott.

Even before that, Bush was given a list of "exchanges" scheduled to occur between U.S. and Soviet officials at a variety of levels that could be postponed in response to Soviet moves in Lithuania. For example, Michael Boskin, the chairman of the Council of Economic Ad-

visers, was warned last week that his trip to Moscow could be postponed if conditions worsened. However, the Soviets announced no new moves and the trip took place.

A senior official said the president, in signaling U.S. displeasure with the escalating tension in Lithuania, also hopes to maintain progress on the major arms control negotiations that are underway and on the broader aspects of the U.S.-Soviet relationship as symbolized by the Bush-Gorbachev summit scheduled for May 30-June 3. The response "he deems appropriate," one official said of Bush, falls in the "category of slowing down certain trade, investment, tax, and other kinds of talks" because those "would hurt the Soviets, while slowing down arms talks, for example, would hurt both sides."

Another official said the White House did not intend to make any official statements or list any actions until Bush is certain an embargo is underway and has a sense of the range of the Soviet action.

"We are told the gas is flowing" into Lithuania, an official said as Bush headed into the NSC meeting "so the Soviets have the option of going forward or not and we don't want to say anything until they actually do something, if they do . . ." Another official said the level of the U.S. response is likely to be calibrated to the severity of the Soviet economic squeeze on Lithuania and, especially, the degree of suffering it causes for the Lithuanian people.